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To What Extent Were Logistics Shortages Responsible for Patton's Culmination on the Meuse in 1944?

Air Commodore Peter Dye

Introduction

On 31 August 1944, the leading elements of General Patton's Third Army crossed the Meuse at Commercy and Pont-sur-Meuse while, 30 miles to the north, a task force entered Verdun some 200 days earlier than had been anticipated.¹ In the month since it had been declared operational, the Third Army had swept across France in a remarkable demonstration of aggression, manoeuvre, and fighting power. At this very moment, having hotly pursued the retreating German Army for more than 350 miles, Patton's mood changed from euphoria to frustration and then to despair as his armour ground to an abrupt halt for want of gasoline. In Patton's view, the failure to deliver the fuel needed by his divisions would ensure, "... hereafter many pages will be written on it—or rather, on the events that produced it."²

Allied Strategy

When the Allies landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944 (D-day), they did so on the basis of a detailed campaign plan that envisaged a steady buildup in the beachhead, followed by a breakout and pursuit of a German Army that would use successive river lines to conduct a fighting retreat across France. It was estimated that by D-plus-90 the general Allied front would be along the line of the Seine. Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Northwest Europe, theoretically ceased at this point, but the planners at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) had examined how the war should be prosecuted beyond the Seine. The favoured line of action was a broad front with the main effort to the left threatening the Ruhr, the industrial heart of Germany, with another thrust toward Metz, both efforts joining in the general area of Kassel, following which it was expected resistance would crumble and Germany would surrender (on D-plus-360). The details of these plans are less important than the strategic thinking that lay behind them. This would later weigh heavily in the decision to halt the Third Army at the Meuse. Just as important, it was on this modest timetable (as events were to prove) that the logistics planners based their support arrangements.

Logistics Planning

While SHAEP dealt with strategic and planning issues, it had been agreed that logistics would be handled on a national basis. Rather than serving to simplify matters, this resulted in a complex, if not Byzantine, support organisation for the American forces in Normandy. Overall responsibility for seeing that the First and Third Armies of the Twelfth US Army Group (TUSAG) received the supplies they required lay with the Communications Zone (ComZ). ComZ had originally been formed as the Services of Supply (SOS) in 1942, but from its very existence, disagreement arose about whether the SOS, rather than theatre headquarters should control logistics—a source of contention that was never satisfactorily resolved. Although logistics planners for Overlord remained a SHAEP responsibility, ComZ created two organisations—the Forward Echelon Communications Zone (FECZ) and the Advance

Section, Communications Zone (AdSec)—to assist the combat commands in their own logistics planning. Thereafter, AdSec was destined to handle all logistics activities on the Continent until such time as sufficient assets were in place for FECZ to assume control, pending arrival of the ComZ. Unfortunately, the relationship between FECZ and AdSec was never made entirely clear, nor that with TUSAG. The inevitable result was a great deal of infighting prior to the landings and confusion, if not disarray, thereafter.³

Beachhead Logistics

Drawing on the experience gained in the Mediterranean, the logistics arrangements for Overlord dealt at considerable length with the challenge of landing stores over open beaches. Detailed, comprehensive, and often innovative plans were produced to ensure the necessary stores and consumables—such as POL, ammunition, and rations—would be available to sustain operations. Great care was taken to assess the likely fuel usage, but the real issue was one of distribution. It was concluded that, while packaged fuel (primarily jerricans) would suffice to meet the needs of the assault force, any hope of sustained operations rested upon the provision of bulk distribution.

In the event, much of the pre-invasion logistics planning failed to survive contact with reality, forcing a significant degree of improvisation once Overlord was underway. By the end of D-day, only a few tons of stores had arrived on the American beaches, although over the next few weeks the situation greatly improved. While the heavy storms later in June did immense damage to shipping and the artificial harbours, they did not greatly slow the buildup of stores in the beachhead. At the end of July, nearly 100 percent of the planned cumulative tonnage of stores had been successfully landed (918,000 tons compared to a planned 986,000 tons) as well as 104 percent of the vehicles and 86 percent of the troops. Distribution remained a weakness, and shortages undoubtedly existed, particularly in ammunition, but overall, the beachhead logistics operation had been a success.

The vital contribution made by logisticians to the overall success of Overlord has been stressed in numerous histories, including Eisenhower's own report.⁴

However, as Steve Waddell has pointed out, a careful and painstaking planning process is no substitute for flexibility. In his opinion, the success or failure of the invasion lay in the ability of the logistics planners to cope with two interrelated issues: the armies' long-term supply requirements (beyond beachhead) and the necessary changes to these plans as the campaign progressed.⁵

Breakout Logistics

As the operational tempo rose through July and August, the logistics system was put under increasing strain. A related problem was the need to increase port capacity before winter made the Normandy beaches unusable. The Overlord planners had proposed

to make up the shortfall by opening the Brittany ports and developing facilities in the Quiberon Bay area—Operation Chastity.⁶ The success of Operation Cobra caused the abandonment of the plan in favour of pursuit of the remaining German forces in France, a decision that some argued was the direct cause of Patton's subsequent supply problems.⁷ Thereafter, support to the advancing armies was entirely dependent on the logistics infrastructure and stockpiles built up in the beachhead (in early September, these still comprised 90 percent of all stores on the Continent).

Until 25 July, the distance between the depots and the front line was generally less than 25 miles. Once the breakout was under way, the stress on the distribution system increased as a function of distance. Fuel became the overriding problem, although the availability of rations and spare parts was also of increasing concern. Paradoxically, while the Germans were in full retreat, ammunition was not an issue. During the pursuit across France, the Third Army consumed 350,000 gallons of fuel every day, while between them, the Allied armies required some 800,000 gallons. Sufficient stocks had actually been built up on the Continent to meet these needs; the problem was to move the fuel and other critical stores over distances that grew longer as each day passed (for example, the time needed to deliver gasoline doubled from 12 hours in mid-July to 24 hours by mid-August).⁸

There was firm evidence as early as 22 August that ComZ was unable to meet this challenge and that logistics shortages might threaten the onward progress of the First and Third Armies. Until 18 August, the fuel situation had been manageable, but by the time the Seine was crossed on 23 August, ComZ was having great difficulty in sustaining more than 1-2 days' reserve of both fuel and rations. To overcome the shortfall, the Red Ball Express was created on 25 August to truck supplies in an around-the-clock shuttle between the Normandy ports and the front line (a round-trip that eventually stretched 700 miles). This staved off the imminent crisis, but the relief was short-lived and only gained at considerable cost. Three newly arrived infantry divisions were stripped of their vehicles to help find the required 6,000 trucks that, in turn, consumed 300,000 gallons of fuel each day, sufficient for a field army. In effect, the Red Ball Express represented a calculated gamble that war would end before the trucks wore out.⁹ Even the Allied air forces were drawn into the unequal struggle. Some 11,000 tons of supplies were brought forward by bomber and transport aircraft in the period up to 25 August. On 27 August, more than 25,000 gallons of fuel were delivered by air to the Third Army. Commendable as they were, these measures were simply inadequate to sustain normal consumption rates.¹⁰ Strenuous efforts were made to utilise the French rail network, but the impact would not be felt before the end of September. Even slower, was the progress with the POL pipeline from Cherbourg, which meant most of the gasoline delivered to the advancing armies would remain in packaged form.

Patton was clearly aware of these developments and had cause to discuss the supply situation with General Bradley, TUSAG Commander, on 23 August, although neither of them seems to have been unduly worried about the implications.¹¹ This provides some support for the suggestion that Patton was largely indifferent about logistics, a point made by Van Creveld, who adds that Patton only saw his headquarters logistics staff officer twice during the 1944-45 campaign.¹² In Patton's defence, it has to be remembered that throughout August the SHAEF planners had repeatedly claimed the critical supply situation that would prevent TUSAG from advancing any farther, only to see such predictions rapidly confounded. The army commanders could be forgiven for believing the logisticians had cried wolf too often. When the seriousness of the situation dawned on 29 August, the Third Army staffs were dumbfounded.¹³ On the previous day, when the amount of gasoline received was markedly short of the daily consumption, General Gay, Patton's chief of staff,

wrote in the *War Diary* that it caused "... a small bit of anxiety for the time."¹⁴

Culmination

From 31 August, Patton received increasingly less fuel, such that, by 2 September, the entire Third Army was ineffectively at a standstill. The hiatus ended on 5 September, but the subsequent campaign was far less mobile in nature in the face of strengthening German resistance and continuing supply shortages. Although the fighting would continue until November, Patton was denied his ambition of reaching the Rhine and the possibility of ending the war in 1944. When the Third Army's tanks had first reached the Meuse, the forces defending Lorraine amounted to only nine infantry battalions, two artillery batteries, and ten tanks. The pause in the offensive enabled the Germans to reinforce and organise, effectively denying Patton the opportunity of sweeping through Lorraine unopposed. One of his staff officers wrote (in an account titled, *Stopped, But Not by the Germans*):

If we could possibly have been reinforced in early September ... and could have been continued priority on supplies, we felt that our intrepid troops could have dashed through the Sigfried Line, cut north through Germany and come up on the rear of the German divisions ...¹⁵

Indeed, this is exactly what the Germans feared would happen:

During August 1944, we often wondered why the enemy command did not immediately push forward towards the east across the Moselle, in the Metz area ... to our great surprise the operations of the Allies came to a full stop in front of the West Wall: supply difficulties were presumably at the root of this.¹⁶

The Culprits

Not surprisingly, Patton was the first to point the accusing finger, "... the delay was due to a change of plan by the High Command, implemented, in my opinion, by General Montgomery."¹⁷

He also mentioned three other culprits: the diversion of airlift to the task of feeding the Parisians; the withdrawal of transport aircraft to support Operation Market Garden; and the decision to move ComZ headquarters from Normandy to Paris, diverting several truck companies from the Red Ball Express in the process.

Looking at these issues in turn, there is no doubt that Montgomery was keen to see the Allies pursue and advance into northern Germany and the Ruhr, but this was entirely in keeping with the strategy previously agreed upon. The dilemma that Eisenhower faced arose because of the limited logistics resources at his disposal. This forced him to deny Patton the opportunity of advancing rapidly into Lorraine, rather than crippling the main advance toward the Ruhr. It seems clear that with adequate supply Eisenhower would have strongly supported Patton, as he did once the situation had improved.

As to the diversion of effort to feed Paris, it is difficult to see what else could have been done. The plan to bypass the city, while no doubt operationally sound, was politically naive. Once Paris had been liberated, its citizens had to be fed, even though the impact of providing relief supplies was significant. On 29 August, ComZ was authorised to divert 1,500 tons per day to Paris regardless of the cost to the military effort.¹⁸ It was doubly unfortunate that this coincided with the withdrawal of transport aircraft, although the deficiency was to some extent offset by the employment of bombers. More to the point, over the entire period of the airlift (from 19 August to mid-September), only an average of 500 tons per day was delivered to TUSAG. A great deal more was expected, but the failure to achieve this was as

- much due to inexperience, poor procedures, and inadequate planning as to competing operational priorities.

The official historian concludes,

... these deficiencies plagued the operation ... and demonstrated that supply by air demanded the same high degree of advance planning and synchronisation of effort that any other logistic activity did.¹⁹

On the other hand, the decision to relocate ComZ to Paris after only 3 weeks in theatre seems entirely unwarranted. Eisenhower certainly felt so, but it proved impractical to reverse the move once underway. General John C. H. Lee, ComZ Commander, appears to have been a difficult man to work with. His nicknames included *Jesus Christ Himself Lee* and *Garbage Can Lee*. Many of his colleagues regarded him as a martinet with an inflated sense of his own importance (to the extent of having his own personal train). However, as has already been discussed, the problems with the US Army logistics organisation went well beyond the issue of personalities. Optimised to support a relatively gentle advance to the Seine by 12 American divisions at D-plus-90, the logistics plan was simply inadequate when faced with the challenge of supporting 16 divisions operating more than 100 miles beyond Paris by the same date. This need not have spelled disaster, but only if the supply system had been able to adapt to circumstances.

Impressive as the achievements of the Third Army were, they were not without parallel. During the Vistula-Oder operation of January 1945, the 1st Ukrainian Front covered roughly the same distance as Patton, albeit in 3 weeks. Such was the pace of the advance, the Russian transport system was unable to meet the demand for gasoline even though considerable quantities of fuel were captured. Fuel trucks had to make journeys of 300 miles or more, before returning in pairs, one towing the other, to conserve fuel. Some regiments were denuded of all their fuel-carrying trucks, but this could not prevent the Second Guard's Tank Army from having to halt for 5 days, and the Fourth Tank Army for 6 days, for want of fuel.²⁰ By this yardstick, therefore, the American logistics system was no worse than the Soviet Army's, albeit the former possessed significantly more resources.²¹ Perhaps the most telling criticism of the logistics planning for Overlord is that it was largely conducted in isolation from operational considerations. As General Henry Aurand later wrote,

... an analysis of World War Two leads to the inescapable conclusion that those charged with its conduct either lacked knowledge of the logistic art, and the basic principles of organisation; or they chose to disregard one or both.²²

The fateful decision to abandon Operation Chastity (and the plans for Quiberon Bay) is described in the official history as "... the first step in a repeated subordination of logistic considerations to prospects of immediate tactical advantage ...".²³

The result was the Allies were unprepared to take advantage of the opportunity to destroy the German forces before winter. Quite simply, "... there was not sufficient time to make the necessary readjustments in the logistical machinery ...".²⁴

Conclusion

Logistics shortages were clearly the primary reason for Patton's halt on the Meuse in 1944. But given the vast resources available to the Allied armies, they should have been much better placed to exploit the strategic opportunities available after the Normandy breakout. The failure arose from inadequate planning coupled with an inefficient and seriously flawed logistics organisation. No single agency was tasked with the direction and control of the logistics effort for the duration of

the Normandy campaign. Admittedly, the scale and speed of the breakout would have caused severe strain to any organisation, but it need not have proved quite so debilitating. It would seem that the Overlord logisticians never considered flexibility as a military virtue.²⁵

That said, it could also be argued that culmination was inevitable. Logistics shortages were just one element in the growing friction that—in the form of increased vehicle breakdown, limited casualty replacements, and delays in airfield construction—would have curtailed operations in any event. The lack of fuel may even have saved Patton from his own impetuosity. The arrogance and opportunism that had served the Third Army so well in its spectacular breakout could just as easily have broken it on the wheel of an increasingly strong German defence. Carlo d'Este has written that Patton's Achilles' heel was that rather than cut his losses he would attempt to storm his way out of a bad situation.¹ Before the year was out, the Ardennes offensive would show the Allies just how formidable and tenacious an enemy they still faced. Nevertheless, the intriguing possibility remains that properly supported the Third Army's momentum could just have carried it into Germany and secured victory in 1944. If any general could have succeeded in such a venture, it was probably Patton.

Notes

1. D'Este, 634.
5. Waddell, 25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 106-7.
8. Carlo d'Este, *A Genius for War*, London: Harper Collins, 1995, 649.
9. Christopher R. Gabel, *The Lorraine Campaign—An Overview*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1985, 5.
10. For example, the Third Army received 396,000 gallons on 12 August, 367,000 gallons on 19 August, and 285 gallons on 26 August, leaving a balance on hand of just 0.6 days' supply.
11. Waddell, 107.
12. Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, 214.
13. Patton, 119-120.
14. D'Este, 21.
15. Brenton G. Wallace, *Patton and His Third Army*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Military Service Publishing Co., 1946, 88.
16. Bodo Zimmerman, *The Fatal Decisions*, London: Michael Joseph, 1956, 205-209.
17. Patton, 119-120.
18. Ronald G. Ruppenthal, *Logistical Support of the Armies*, Dept of the Army, 1950, 577.
19. *Ibid.*, 582.
20. Christopher Duffy, *Red Storm on the Reich*, London: Routledge, 1991, 347-348.
21. This point is well made by Van Creveld, 212-215, who finds it hard to reconcile the pessimism of the planners with the superabundance at their disposal.
22. Waddell, xvi.
23. Ruppenthal, 483.
24. Forrest Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, Dept of the Army, 1954, 260.
25. Russell E. Weighley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, Bloomington, Illinois: Indiana Univ Press, 1981, 419.
26. D'Este, 634.

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